

An Inside Job

February 12, 2020

When the Buddha gave the shortest summary of his awakening, it was a causal principle: When this is, that is. From the arising of this comes the arising of that. When this isn't, that isn't. From the cessation of this comes the cessation of that.

The "this" and the "that" refer to things that are directly experienced. Neurons may be firing in your brain, but you don't experience the chemicals or the electrical impulses directly. What you experience may be an intention or a perception.

From the point of view of your experience, science talks about things far away and inferred. So it's a mistake to see the practice as a kind of science. Now, there are some parallels. A scientist conducting an experiment has to make a few assumptions about the power of action: that the scientist can change conditions and is responsible for the decision to change the conditions, and if a change in the conditions is accompanied by a change in the results, we can assume that there's a connection between the two. All these things are assumed. In the same way, when the Buddha teaches, he says, "Try this. Then try something else. Compare the results and learn from them."

That's how the Buddha found his awakening. That's how he recommends that we practice. From that point on, though, the parallel breaks down. You can't run controlled experiments inside your mind. In other words, you can't tell part of the mind to do this at this time, and another part of the mind to do something else at the same time. They can't go back to the same initial conditions.

But the general principle that your actions will make a difference is one that's worth assuming because we have a problem inside that the scientists don't have outside. When they look at your brain, it doesn't make any difference to them whether your brain is suffering or not. But for you, you feel the suffering inside, and it *does* make a big difference. In fact, they can't tell why you change your mind, or how you experience a perception or an intention. There are lots of things they can't tell about you from outside.

The big difference, of course, is that you're committed inside. Your actions will lead to results that you're going to experience. If you're not careful about how you act, you can cause yourself a lot of suffering. That is an assumption, but it's an assumption worth making because if you assume that your actions don't make any difference, then you get very careless, and you don't really explore the possibilities of what human action can bring about.

So you're committed. It's like that old distinction between the bacon and the eggs in a breakfast. The chicken participates, but the pig is committed. You're committed: This is your mind. These are your choices, and you're going to reap the results. So if there's a possibility that you can bring about better results, it's worth trying. And as the Buddha said, the important thing is to notice how this principle of causality works itself out in areas that you can directly experience.

This is how we go from delusion to knowledge, or from uncertainty to knowledge. You start with something simple: the breath. How you experience the breath is something no one else can know. This is one of the reasons why it's so difficult to talk about breath energies, or how the breath is experienced in the body. Your experience may be different from someone else's, and we don't have much of a vocabulary in Western languages to describe this.

I have a student who has compromised lung capacity, and she now has to have an oxygen monitor for her blood all the time. She's discovered that if she thinks of the breath going through the whole body, the oxygen level in her blood does go up—which is a curiosity. But the important thing is how it feels from the inside. Can you create a sense of well-being here?

We spend a lot of time working with the body in the meditation. Some people get frustrated. They say, "When are we going to work directly with issues of the mind—spiritual issues?" Well, one, you've got to clean up the body first. It's like having a home that you're going to be living in. You've got to clean up your home first before you do anything else in there. And two, one of the big issues for the mind is its relationship to the body.

We spend so much of our time worrying about the body. A nerve gets pinched in your spine and it can create a lot of pain. You could spend a lot of money and time trying to solve the problem. This goes wrong; that goes wrong. It takes a lot of energy. The older you get, the more you find these things start falling apart. And they don't ask your permission. Even before you get old, you have to eat. You have all these needs in terms of food, clothing, shelter, and medicine that you've got to take care of. And they can overwhelm you.

So you want to clean up your relationship to the body, first in your attitude as to what's really useful about the body—what it's good for—reminding yourself that it's good for the practice. And second, it gives you a good place to stay, because the mind needs a solid place to stay, a comfortable place to stay if it's really going to see itself clearly.

So we spend a lot of time working on how the body feels from within. Don't regard it as wasted time or a distraction. It's a necessary step in getting to know your own mind. Of all the things in the world, what are you most attached to?

You're most attached to the body. What do you live with 24/7? You live with the body. So develop the right attitude toward your body. Develop a skillful way of interacting with it.

As you get to know the breath in the different parts of the body, you learn how to, as the Buddha says, calm bodily fabrication. That allows you to work more and more directly with the mind. It's like tuning a radio into a station. If there's a lot of static, you can't hear the signal. When you've tuned things in just right, the static is gone. You can hear things clearly. In the same way, when the breath gets really, really still, then the events in the mind come to the fore, sharp and clear.

This allows you to look at the issue of why the mind creates suffering. Again, this might seem like a small issue to some people. They'd like bigger issues. But the fact of pain and suffering in the mind keeps pulling you back. This is where the mind's real concerns are. In fact, it's probably why we start thinking to begin with. We're in pain. We can't figure it out. So we try thinking: Why, why, why is this happening? We look for a solution, first looking for other people to help solve the problem. Then, when we realize we've got to solve it ourselves, we have to get thinking and observing. You have to see how you're putting your experience together.

So you're not dealing with abstractions. Again, this is an issue some people have: They think that spiritual issues have to be very abstract. But this is not abstract. It's getting to see your mind in action as you directly experience it right here, right now. What does an intention feel like? How do you know that an intention is formed? How do you decide to go with an intention or not to go with an intention? How do you change your mind? What is it like to do these things? As you watch in this way, you're stepping out of the thoughts—out of the content and looking at them as processes.

The more you do this, the more you begin to realize how much your experience of both body and mind, and the world outside, are things you put together. A sight comes into the eyes, and there's a lot of interpretation that has to go on, getting a sense of the three-dimensional world around you and how that particular sight fits in with other things you see. There's a lot of processing that goes on just to make sense of your visual field. All the other sensory fields require interpretation, too. The mind itself, as it churns out its thoughts, raises a lot of questions. It requires a lot of cobbling together to have answers.

So when you see how all of this is fabricated, you begin to wonder how you can find happiness with fabricated things like this. The mind begins to get more and more inclined to want to find stillness, so it turns more and more to concentration. At first, the concentration seems very peaceful compared to

everything else, to the point where you would think it may be unfabricated. It's just there, especially as you tune into deeper and deeper levels of concentration with an unbounded sense of space, a sense of knowing. Everything seems to come out of the knowing and go into the knowing. And the knowing is not disturbed. It's the same with the space.

A lot of people get deluded right here. They think they've reached the "ground of being." It's so still and so pervasive. But it is fabricated. Scientists have done tests and have discovered when certain areas of the brain are activated, there's a great sense of Oneness. They call it the "God spot," as if they had answered the question, "This is why people have religions: It's because of the God spot." Now, if the Buddha had you end up with just that sense of Oneness, maybe they'd be right. But he keeps saying no, there's more. This, too, is fabricated.

As you experience it from within, you begin to realize that you put it together. You recognize it; you label it; there's an effort that goes into maintaining it. That effort may be very subtle, but it's there. You can see that even this is fabricated. You can see what you've done to keep it going.

Then there comes a point that's hard to describe. You realize you can't stay there if you want to get beyond the stress of that particular state, and you can't go someplace else because everything else you're going to go to will also be fabricated.

Then, between the going and the staying, there's an opening. There's something that's totally unfabricated, totally unconditioned, unintended, an area where scientists can't go. Everything they know is all conditioned, but this is not. And that's where you find the solution to the problem, to the questions of, "Why are we suffering and how can we stop?" Well, this is how you stop. And once that problem is answered, there are no other questions that eat away at the mind.

Now there will be other problems you can solve, or try to solve, but this big problem has been solved. *Your* big problem has been solved, and it's been solved from within. This is why you might say the whole practice of the Dhamma is an inside job. The problem is something that's sensed only from within: your suffering. And the solution comes from understanding how you experience things from within and how you can clear away all the fabrications and find something unfabricated within.

At that point, there are no more doubts. You might have questions about the world outside, but now those questions don't have teeth. They don't eat away at the heart the same way the question of suffering eats away at the heart. With nothing eating the heart, it can be whole: something that's truly deserving of being our goal.